

DOSSIER “Human development, drama and perezhivania:  
Vygotsky and the question of the psychology of the actor’s creation”<sup>1 2</sup>

## The question of emotions and aesthetic experience: the dialogue between Vygotsky and Stanislavski around actor’s psychology<sup>3 4 5 6</sup>

### *A questão das emoções e da vivência estética: o diálogo entre Vigotski e Stanislávski em torno da psicologia do ator*

Marques, Priscila Nascimento <sup>(i)</sup>

Moschkovich, Diego <sup>(ii)</sup>

<sup>(i)</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro – UFRJ, Faculdade de Letras, Departamento de Letras Orientais e Eslavas, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7111-6372>, [priscilamarques@letras.ufrj.br](mailto:priscilamarques@letras.ufrj.br)

<sup>(ii)</sup> Universidade de São Paulo – USP, Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Artes Cênicas, São Paulo, SP, Brasil. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5741-8166>, [diego.moscou@usp.br](mailto:diego.moscou@usp.br)

#### Abstract

The paper examines the occurrences of the perezhivanie concept in Vygotsky’s texts about art, particularly the essay on Hamlet, written in 1915, The Psychology of Art, written in 1925, and the book chapter Aesthetic Education, published in Educational Psychology in 1926. Then, the paper focuses on the text "On the problem of the psychology of the actor's creative work," aiming to understand how Vygotsky critically analyses the ideas of Denis Diderot and Konstantin Stanislavsky to propose his original outlook on the psychology of the actor's scenic perezhivanie. The paper seeks to contextualize the 1932 text in Vygotsky's framework of interests that articulate theatrical art and the study of emotions against the background of previous writings.

**Keywords:** perezhivanie, theater, psychology of art, emotions

<sup>1</sup> For more information, please see: Vigotski (2023).

<sup>2</sup> Thematic Dossier organized by Priscila Nascimento Marques <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7111-6372>> and Ana Luiza Bustamante Smolka <<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2064-3391>> .

<sup>3</sup> Responsible editor: César Donizetti Pereira Leite. <<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8889-750X>>

<sup>4</sup> References correction and bibliographic normalization services: Leda Maria de Souza Freitas Farah. <[leda.farah@terra.com.br](mailto:leda.farah@terra.com.br)>

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<sup>6</sup> English version: Viviane Ramos. <[vivianeramos@gmail.com](mailto:vivianeramos@gmail.com)>

## **Resumo**

O artigo objetiva examinar as ocorrências do conceito de vivência em textos vigotskianos sobre arte, particularmente o ensaio sobre *Hamlet*, de 1915; o livro *Psicologia da arte*, de 1925; e o capítulo “Educação Estética”, publicado em *Psicologia pedagógica*, de 1926. Em seguida, o artigo se debruça sobre o texto “A psicologia do trabalho criativo pelo ator”, buscando compreender como nele Vigotski analisa criticamente as ideias de Denis Diderot e Konstantin Stanislávski para propor uma visada original sobre a psicologia da vivência cênica do ator. Visto sob o pano de fundo de escritos anteriores, o artigo pretende contextualizar o texto de 1932 dentro do quadro de interesses de Vigotski, que articula o campo da arte teatral e o estudo das emoções.

**Palavras-chave:** vivência, teatro, psicologia da arte, emoções

## **The history and reception of the *perezhivanie* concept in Vygotsky and Stanislavski**

Some authors establish an arch between the initial and final work of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) because some themes delineated or not completely developed in his first texts reappear in his last productions (González Rey, 2016; Mok, 2017; Rubtsova & Daniels, 2016). This would be the case of the emotions and *perezhivanie*, so relevant in the texts about art or those with a critical or scientific nature and less central in the instrumental period of his work.

However, until recently, there was little attention to this concept. Indeed, it is not even mentioned as an analytical category in the Cultural-Historical Theory and just reached such status in recent years. A milestone in this “discovery” process was published in the special number of the journal *Mind, Culture, and Activity* (23, 2016) about this topic.

Something similar can be seen when we observe the reception of the concept of *perezhivanie* in Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938).<sup>7</sup> Only recently it was possible to reestablish a continuity between his early and final work (generally called the "last" Stanislavski). In the case of the Russian director, pedagogue, and actor, *perezhivanie* was generally understood as an outdated concept connected to the so-called "emotional memory" and disposed with it in the last period of his life.

Tcherkasski (2017) suggests that the division between the young, romantic, experimentalist man and the old and wise scientist is the result of an artificial split created in the scope of a narrative construction of a Soviet Stanislavski. However, other works published in the last years (Moschkovich, 2021b; Shevtsova, 2019; Tcherásski, 2016; Whyman, 2008) allow us to see how *perezhivanie* appears transversally as a central category in Stanislavski's theatrical work.

Returning to Vygotsky, if today the theme of *perezhivanie* appears as an unavoidable point to understand the more elaborated formulations of the Cultural-Historical Theory about childhood development, which has increasingly advanced in the studies on the area, the same cannot be said about the reception of Vygotsky's work on art. One of the authors to recover the importance of Vygotsky's early work was González Rey (2016, 2018), who employed anachronistically the notion of artistic *performance* to refer to the object of study in *The psychology of art*. The author also considers that Vygotsky's main interest was artistic creation, a point that could hardly be made, since the concept in his psychology of art – the aesthetic reaction- is not in the field of creative processes but in that of reception. Regarding the origin of the concept of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky, the main hypothesis refers to the possible connections with Stanislavski's ideas (Mok, 2017). As we will see, this is a complex hypothesis to prove, considering the differences between the conceptions of *perezhivanie* in both authors. To Rubtsova and Daniels (2016), Vygotsky's early work as a theater critic would be evidence of the hypothesis that the concept of *perezhivanie* emerged in the theater theory. Also, about the relationships between theater and psychology, Capucci and Silva (2017) consider that theater

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<sup>7</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) was a Russian actor, director, and theater pedagogue. Together with Vladimir Ivanovich Danchenko (1858-1943), Stanislavski was one of the founders of the Moscow Art Theater in 1898 and worked for many years on what is commonly called the Stanislavski's System, a system of inter-articulated elements of the actor's practice, aiming to produce the scenic experience (*perezhivanie*) as a living experience.

would be a “microcosm of human life” (p. 418), as development can be understood through drama terms.

On the occurrences of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky, Veresov (2016) affirms that, initially, the term is used to designate a phenomenon or process, and only later emerges as a concept to study childhood development in the context of Cultural-Historical-Theory. The first type of occurrence, i.e., as a psychological phenomenon, would be typical of Vygotsky’s first works and did not presuppose a defined theoretical content. In fact, it was a recurrent term in philosophy, in John Dewey and Wilhelm Dilthey, and psychology in William James,<sup>8</sup> and appeared in Vygotsky to name the content of direct psychological experience and the psychological processes involved in how something is experienced by the individual (Varcháva & Vigotski, 1931, p. 128; Veresov & Fleer, 2016). Only later, between 1933 and 1934, the term was introduced as a concept within the Cultural-Historical Theory in the lecture entitled “The paedology question,” from *Lectures in Pedology* (Vigotski, 2018).

Despite some inconsistencies that will also be discussed, we intend to see to what extent the presence of the idea of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky’s initial work is already embedded by a certain rigor and originality in the author’s thought and precociously delineated in a particular content that surpasses the simple loan of terminology from existing philosophical and psychological theories. We attempt here to find continuities and discontinuities – an effort that is analogous the one undertaken by Toassa (2009) –, perspective changes and theoretical dialogues in this process of construction of a concept.

Starting from examining the notion of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky’s texts about art from the first phase (essay about *Hamlet*, theatrical reviews, *The psychology of art*, and the chapter

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of *experience*, by Dewey and James, and *Erlebnis*, by Dilthey, were translated into Russian as *perezhivanie*. In German, as well as in Russian and Portuguese, contrary to English, there are two words that correspond to the semantic field of “experience”: *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*, the first has in its root the verb *leben* (live) and, therefore, is closer to *perezhivanie* (derived from the verb *zhít*, to live), in Russian, and “*vivência*” in Portuguese, the option commonly chosen in Vygotsky’s translations in this language. We could discuss some challenges to translate this word into Portuguese, mainly in the field of theater (Moschkovich, 2012a, p. 14). The prefix *pere* has two possibilities of translation. The first, more used historically, is equivalent to the Latin *re* (thus, some authors opt for *revivência*). The meaning of the prefix *pere* in *perezhivanie*, however, indicates a movement from one point to another, equivalent to the Latin *trans*. For an adequate translation of the term (aiming to escape an interesting, though confusing, neologism *transexperience*), we have been opting in the theater translations for the binomial *vivência/experiência do vivo* [experience / living experience], used as synonyms and complementary to each other. About this, see the footnote on Knebel (2016, p. 26). For this article, given the different translations found for *perezhivanie* in the study fields of Vygotsky and Stanislavski, we opted to maintain, whenever possible, the transliterated Russian word.

“Aesthetic education”) and establishing a body of aesthetic ideas that serve as a background to understand the text “On the problem of the psychology of the actor’s creative work,” the article outlines a genealogy of the concept in Stanislavski to establish some differences and similarities when understanding both authors. We also discuss Vygotsky’s and Stanislavski’s positions about Denis Diderot (1743-1784)<sup>9</sup> and try to establish some connections between both.

## A brief overview of occurrences and meanings of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky’s work about art

The theme of emotions in Vygotsky's work is, at the same time, fundamental and vague. The author often declared the centrality of this topic for psychology, but we cannot say he was able theoretically systematize it. The writing *Theory of emotions* (Vygotski, 1984), which would be a more consistent step in this direction, was not concluded, offering more of a critical comment on the existing theories than his own formulation.

This topic is mainly present in the author's initial work, particularly in the writings about art, as can be seen in the definition of art elaborated in *The Psychology of Art*, art as the *social technique of emotions*. The theatrical reviews display numerous comments about the different emotions engendered by the plays and potentially raised in the spectator.

Still, in his essay about *Hamlet*, Vygotsky (1999a) problematizes the formula of the “aesthetic pleasure,” arguing that, in the case of tragedy, it is first a “deep feeling, an obfuscation of the spirit,” that is, “tragedy captures us in the nets of its own consciousness, kindles the tragic fire of our 'selves,' thus, its *perezhivanie* becomes a deep anguish, instead of the expected aesthetic ‘pleasure’ (p. 185). The end of *Hamlet* – “the rest is silence” –, to Vygotsky, indicates that the tragedy does not truly end to the spectator: “tragedy needs to be concluded, we need to complete it in ourselves, in our *perezhivanie*” (p. 185).

In 1916, Vygotsky approached the theme of emotions in the process of art fruition as a central aspect of his “reader’s critique” (Marques, 2012). For instance, the emotional nature of the aesthetic reaction appears in the excerpt “mystery cannot be reached by prediction, by

<sup>9</sup> Denis Diderot (1743-1784), philosopher and playwright, was one of the leading names of the French Enlightenment.

the *perezhivanie* of the mysterious” (Vygotski, 1999a, p. 12). In this work, the author uses the term *perezhivanie* to describe the experiences of the reader, the critic, and Hamlet himself.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, he states that his critical study aims to guide the reader’s experience as if contaminating him with the critic’s experience (p. 179).

In *The Psychology of Art*, Vygotsky (2001) uses interchangeably the terms "aesthetic experience" (*esteticheskoe perezhivanie*) and "aesthetic reaction" (*esteticheskaya reaktsiya*) to describe one’s fruition of an artistic object as an experience with an eminently emotional character. We should stress that, though the term *perezhivanie* is widely recurrently in this work, Vygotsky prefers "aesthetic reaction" to define the study object of his psychology of art, in a clear reference to Konstantin Kornilov’s (1879-1957) reactology theory, in vogue at the time. The distribution of occurrences of these terms in the first chapter of the work is striking: "*perezhivanie*" and its variants (to experience - *perezhivat*, experienced - *perezhit*) predominate in the first two-thirds of the chapter, while Vygotsky deals with the different approaches to the psychological problem of art. In the final third, in which he establishes the methodological principles of his study, the author only uses the term "reaction." Finally, it is noteworthy that the book section presenting analytical examples is entitled "Analysis of the Aesthetic Reaction."

In this same book, Vygotsky (2001) takes the artwork as a system of stimuli consciously organized to raise a specific type of emotion because it emerges from the contact with an aesthetic object and, therefore, is called an "aesthetic reaction." Aiming to create an objective psychology of art, he seeks to indirectly reconstruct the aesthetic reaction from objective evidence, i.e., from the structure of the work itself (its form), to eliminate the idiosyncrasies connected explicitly to the creator's or reader’s psyche. The method that enables this objective, called by Vygotsky "analytical-objective method," is indirect because it grasps the aesthetic reaction not by the direct study of the reader but by the evidence found in the work (Ivanov, 2001, p. 420; Vygotski, 2001, p. 25; Vygotski, 2004, p. 371). Therefore, it is a study of the reaction in its abstracted form, which "will not belong to any particular individual nor reflect any individual psychological process in all its concreteness" (Vygotski, 2001, p. 26).

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<sup>10</sup> In the case of Hamlet, Vygotsky refers to a mythical experience (*misticheskoe perezhivanie*) based on the ideas expressed in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James (1999).

Hence, aesthetic *perezhivanie* and emotion are marked by characteristics distinguishing them from everyday experiences and emotions. The first is that they are products of the contact with an artwork and, thus, are marked by the dialectical counter position of emotions from opposite senses, resolved in the plan of fantasy. The external manifestation of this emotion is held back, and its resolution takes place in an abstract plan so that “art emotions are intelligent emotions” (Vigotski, 2001, p. 267). Nonetheless, the lack of motor expression does not mean that the emotion is not real. On the contrary, art emotions are experienced with reality and force. The aesthetic *perezhivanie* transforms feelings through contrasting opposite emotions, which also demands a high level of creative activity from the reader.

Hence, besides presupposing an active role of the reader and implying a particular connection between emotion and fantasy, the aesthetic *perezhivanie* in *The psychology of art* (Vigotski, 2001) has a social meaning, as “art can never be thoroughly explicated from the small circle of individual life but forcibly requires the explanation of a large cycle of social life” (p. 99).

Written in 1925, *The Psychology of Art* (2001) does not belong to the corpus about developmental psychology, so the use of the idea of *perezhivanie* there cannot be generalized for this field. Furthermore, the author was then in dialogue with the theoretical assumptions of reflexology and reactology, and the pillars of the so-called Cultural-Historical Psychology were not yet established. Nonetheless, a careful analysis of his first works can show the originality of Vygotsky’s perspective. His initial elaboration of the notion of (aesthetic) *perezhivanie* is more than a repetition or reformulation of ideas from other authors. Indeed, it presented some important characteristics of the concept that would be later developed. Thus, among the different phases of his production, there are not only discontinuities but also some continuity threads.

The theme of aesthetic *perezhivanie* is also present in the chapter “Aesthetic education” from the book *Educational Psychology*, published in 1926 (Vigotski, 2003). It is a textbook used in teacher training courses; thus, it has an accessible language with plenty of metaphors and the panoramic and non-exhaustive character of some analyses and references. To Vygotsky, aesthetic education implies promoting aesthetic experiences, particularly during childhood. The author rejects that the aesthetic experience should have as an end the teaching of moral values, theoretical knowledge, or pleasure. Education for art should not be subordinated to

pedagogical, moral, or hedonist ends. Then, the author lists the fundamental traits of the aesthetic *perezhivanie*: its active character, biological meaning, and psychological characteristics. To some extent, all these points are present in *The Psychology of Art*.

In *Educational Psychology*, the equivalence of the terms “*perezhivanie*” and “reaction” appears even more explicitly, as can be seen in the quote: “In this sense, we can clearly say that the aesthetic *perezhivanie* is structured according to the exact model of a common reaction, which necessarily assumes the presence of three components: excitation, elaboration [processing], and response” (Vygotski, 2003, p. 229). Regardless of a certain passiveness and contemplative attitude involved in appreciating art, the aesthetic *perezhivanie* is not summed up to this moment. The reader captures the elements of the artwork, he then internally re-elaborates them in a creative/active process involving some psychological functions, such as perception, memory, and associative thought, which Vygotsky calls “secondary creative synthesis.” The same idea appears in *The Psychology of Art* (Vygotski, 2001):

the perception of art requires creativity: it is not enough to experience [*perezhiv*] the feeling, or feelings, of the author sincerely; it is not enough to understand the structure of the work of art; one must also creatively overcome one's feelings and find one's catharsis; only then will the effect of art be complete. (p. 314).

When approaching the biological meaning of art and aesthetic experience, Vygotsky resumes the originally practical and utilitarian role of music, for example, as accompaniment and means to organize work and fight in the army. Such a role is less direct in the modern world, but art lingers as a biological mechanism, as it is a vehicle that allows us to overcome unrealized excitements in life. In this Vygotskian version of Freud's sublimation, aesthetic education should

create in the person a permanent channel for the correct functioning that derives and deviates the pressure of the unconscious for useful needs. Sublimation performs in socially beneficial forms what the dream and the sickness perform individually and pathologically (Vygotski, 2003, p. 232).

Vygotsky critically discusses the psychoanalytical view of art in the fourth chapter of *The Psychology of Art*. In this text, the author criticizes the sexual and unconscious determinism that marks the understanding of artistic creation. More than this, the main flaw of this theory

was that it ignored the role of the artistic form, which leads to considering art as equivalent to jokes, dreams, and fantasies (Vygotski, 2001, pp. 81-99).

About the aesthetic *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky (2003) affirms: “when we observe...an aesthetic reaction, we notice that its final objective is not the repetition of any real reaction to overcome and triumph over it” (p. 232). Thus, the specificity of the aesthetic *perezhivanie* lies in overcoming a certain real content, elevating it from everyday life. It can also act as an organizer of future behavior, seeing that “as every intense *perezhivanie*, the aesthetic *perezhivanie*, creates a very sensitive state for future actions” (p. 234). The relationship between the *perezhivanie* of art and future behavior is also developed in the last chapters of *The Psychology of Art*, in which art is unveiled in all its potential to build social life and the new man, a potential that, though not fully known, is considered decisive by the author: “Without a new art there will not be a new man” (Vygotski, 2001, p. 329).

Another fundamental aspect of the aesthetic *perezhivanie* is its dialectical character. Art’s dialectical working allows emotions to be reorganized through “the most complex activity of an internal struggle that is solved by catharsis” (Vygotski, 2003, p. 235). Vygotsky extensively deals with emotions of opposite nature (horror and pity) that produce catharsis, according to Aristotle.<sup>11</sup> However, for the author, the conflict between contradictory emotions leads to elevation and overcoming, i.e., the catharsis in Vygotsky (2001) is represented not by the Aristotelian idea of purification or purge of emotions but by transformation, destruction<sup>12</sup>, and short-circuit: “the law of aesthetic principle is but one: it encloses an emotion that develops in two opposite directions and finds its destruction at the climax, as a type of short-circuit” (p. 270). Similarly, Vygotsky (2003) opposes the idea that art presents a facilitated version of reality and that, because of this, contact with it would result in pleasure (p. 231). On the contrary, artistic *perezhivanie* represents a complexification of reality, a de-automatized

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<sup>11</sup> Tragedy is “an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and horror effecting the proper purgation of these emotions” (Aristóteles, 2013, p. 37).

<sup>12</sup> Vygotsky resumes Schiller’s conception of form, according to which form destroys content (Schiller, 1991, p. 117). Nonetheless, we must consider Iarochovski’s warning (2013, p. 180) that we should not understand destruction as the elimination of content in favor of mastering an empty form, non-semantic, but the “discovery of a special connection between form and content, inherent to art, specific of a certain organization of content, which granted him a character of aesthetic reality, able to differently affect the behavior and internal structure of human personality, unlike any other cultural phenomena.”

perception. In this sense, the author almost completely incorporates the concept of defamiliarization from Russian Formalism (Vigotski, 2001, p. 65; Marques, 2020).

Regarding aesthetic education, Vygotsky discusses the importance of aesthetic experience and artistic creation in the context of child development. As it was said, *perezživanie* has itself an active and creative character, so the author takes both in their common nature. Creation has the role of allowing children to surpass their immediate experiences. It is a tool of child psychological development that has, thus, a utilitarian and not aesthetical character. Instead, it is a way to unleash children's creative potential in an environment that is not suffocated by rules but can include the introduction of specific technical knowledge to widen children's repertoire. The contact with art, i.e., promoting the aesthetic experience and the artistic creation in childhood are objects of social education. They should be consciously conducted and directed, aiming to

widen to the maximum the limits of the restricted personal experience, organize the contact of children's psyche with the broadest spheres possible to the social experience accumulated, and insert children within the circle of life with the greatest possible amplitude (Vigotski, 2003, p. 238).

Summing up, we can say that the aesthetic *perezživanie* in the Vygotsky's early works is a type of experience that a) differs from the everyday *perezživanie* (i.e., the one not elicited by art) and, more than this, implies overcoming it; b) has an emotional nature, or, more precisely, involves a particular transformation of emotions through the production of intelligent emotions; c) has a social character because its meaning surpasses the limits of individual psychology; d) has an active character because, to be realized, it involves psychological processes, such as perception and fantasy; e) plays a role in human development, both in childhood and for production of the "new man."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> About this last point, we highlight that the aesthetic *perezživanie* focuses on real life and the construction of the future. Therefore, even if aesthetic *perezživanie* and emotion are specific, and different from everyday ones, their result affects the relationships between the individual and society, reverberating in social life. To Vygotsky, art serves not as a decoration but as a creative re-elaboration of life. In this sense, the author enthusiastically incorporates the motto of the futurist movement expressed by Tchujak (1923, p. 12) about art as a form to build life: "[...] art is only a method of the construction of life that is quantitatively peculiar, temporary, and which involves the predominance of emotions and, as such, cannot be isolated or, even less, prolonged independently from other forms of constructing life".

## Perezhivanie in Stanislávski: points of convergence and divergence

As we know, *perezhivanie* is also a central category in Stanislavski's thought, which led to some assumptions on the inter-relation of this thought with the one by Vygotsky (Capucci & Silva, 2017; Mok, 2017). However, this is a complex statement, and taking this route requires a deeper investigation. This article just points out possible points of convergence and divergence between both thinkers.

Zaltron (2021) develops an explanation about this category in Stanislavski's work. The first aspect the author highlights is the indissoluble link of this term, in Russian, with the word emotion (*chuvstvo*). In *The Actor: Work on Oneself*, the first of his books about his "system," Stanislavski (1954) is emphatic when defining his own theater as a *perezhivanie* theater (p. 22). His discussion on the concept is created in the following terms: when "thinking, wanting, aspiring, and acting on the stage ... in the conditions of the life of the role and in complete analogy with it", the actor "gets closer to the role and starts to feel together with it" (p. 25). According to Stanislavski, this *feeling* is called, in the theater jargon, *perezhivanie*.

Each in their own way, Tcherkasski (2016) and Whyman (2008) reconstruct historically and theoretically the terms presented in Stanislavski's "system". In this body of knowledge, we see side by side very different elements, such as *affective memory* (taken from the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French experimental psychology and *prana* (from yoga), *unconscious* (inspired by the work of the German Eduard von Hartmann) and *scenic action*. Both researchers state that Stanislavski started from his practice as an actor and director. The resort to the scientific – and, in some cases, metaphysical – terms of the time is done mainly through a descriptive and non-ontological use of these categories. In his Russian edition of *La Psychologie des Sentiments* by Théodule Ribot, Stanislavski highlighted in 1908: "Could images .... of experienced emotions [*perezhityeb*, past participle of *perezhivat*] involuntarily reappear in the consciousness or be caused by the power of will, without any exterior event?" (referred by Tcherkasski, 2016, p. 71). That is, *perezhivanie* appears as a specific form of how emotions are experienced.

Nevertheless, according to Whyman (2008), the meaning of *perezhivanie* to Stanislavski, though confirmed by his scientific readings, derives from Lev Tolstoy's aesthetic thought, expressed in his *What is Art?*, written in 1897. To Tolstoy (2015) (as well as to Stanislavski),

*perezhivanie* is the emotional quality that distinguishes the artistic or non-artistic character of a work. Tolstoy considers art to be a form of human communication directly enacted by emotions, with no mediation of reason. Thus, a work can be defined as art when the artist's emotion is also experienced and lived by the spectator. *Perezhivanie* is what allows the contamination of emotions between the artist and the public and— in the case of theater — between the stage and the audience.

This brief genealogy of the use of the word *perezhivanie* in Stanislavski's work- i.e., his inspiration in the French experimental psychology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the sharing with Tolstoy of the ontology of art – suggests two points on the convergences and divergences between *perezhivanie* to Stanislavski and Vygotsky. The first is the proximity of these authors at recognizing the emotional character of *perezhivanie*. However, they distance in the sense that, for Stanislavski, *perezhivanie* is a private and intimate experience that belongs in the theatrical collective (which includes the audience) while for Vygotsky it is eminently a historical and social experience.

## The scenic *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky: The Problem of the Psychology of the Actor's Creative Work

In “On the problem of the psychology of the actor's creative work,” Vygotsky refers to scenic *perezhivanie* and the actor's *perezhivanie*, as somewhat synonyms, and to artistic *perezhivanie* and the everyday one (*zhitskaya*), as opposed terms. Besides this, the author uses the verbal form *perezhivat* in two key moments of the text: first when formulating the actor's paradox: “must the actor experience what he portrays, or is his acting a higher form of ‘aping’, an imitation of an ideal prototype?” (Vigotski, 1999b, p. 239; and on a Stanislavski quotation about the fact that the emotions experienced by the actor on stage differ from those from life.

As previously pointed out, the distinction between common (everyday) *perezhivanie* and aesthetic *perezhivanie* is crucial for the Vygotsky since his early works. The idea of an aesthetic *perezhivanie* is inextricably connected to an understanding of art as a specific product of human creativity and social life. Art appears as an intersection point between the individual and the

social that, through the artistic form, produces an elaboration of the field of human emotion that can transform it.<sup>14</sup>

This social and supra-individual facet of emotion in art, emphasized by Vygotsky, is expressed in the text about the psychology of the actor in methodological terms, particularly when the author insists on the need to surpass the limits of strict empiricism. The aesthetic *perezhivanie* of both the actor and the audience is not limited to the immediate experience, as in the definition presented in the *Dictionary of Psychology* (Varchava & Vigotski, 1931, p. 128). Therefore, if we take the conceptual elaboration presented in the early writings and in the text about the actor we do not see a mere repetition of a generic psychological notion, but an explicit movement of Vygotsky in which he distances himself from empiricism and subjectivism.

Personal emotion is the raw material that will be artistically elaborated. The actor's self-perception is taken as only one of the possible sources to investigate his psychology. We notice here a trace of the treatment of the notions of form and content present in *The Psychology of Art*, as content – the actor's emotion – is transformed through the way it is organized in the work. Besides this, the analysis of a particular and individual occurrence is insufficient to capture the complexity and nature of the aesthetic *perezhivanie* in all its implications.

Beyond the subjective aspect, several other layers should be considered when studying the scenic *perezhivanie*: we need to consider that the emotion the actor seeks to transmit on the stage had, first, a literary expression – Vygotsky uses the example of Tchekhovian anguish in *Three Sisters*. The emotion incarnated by the actor on stage is itself a product of culture, usually in form of a drama, which precedes and extrapolates the subjectivity of the performer. Furthermore, the works should be understood as a specific form of ideology that, in turn, is connected to the elaboration of emotions in social consciousness (Bukhárin, 2008; Vygotsky, 2001).

Hence, scenic emotions and *perezhivanie* are marked by a supra-personal character. They are engendered by the social field and oriented towards them. They equally belong to the actor, the audience, and the social consciousness. However, this aspect does not eliminate the

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the formulations used in *The Psychology of Art*: “art is the social in us” (Vigotski, 2001, p. 315) and the definition of art as the social technique of emotions (Vigotski, 2001, p. 308).

subjective nature of the actor's *perezkhivanie*. For Vygotsky, the private emotional sphere of the actor is instrumentalized. It emerges as a raw material that will receive a specific formulation depending on the aesthetic and stylistic task the staging seeks to solve. The subordination of the actor's experience to the objectives established for the staging is a crucial aspect of Vygotsky's perspective to overcome the dichotomy between a real emotion and an imitation of it, which is at the core of the paradox of the actor.

As with other artistic objects, the actor's *perezkhivanie* is constituted by material, content, and form, elements that are inextricably interconnected. To understand these elements, we can use an analogy with the visual arts: the ink and the canvas would be the material, the content would be the image represented (a landscape, a historical scene, etc.), and the form would correspond to the stylistic procedures used to make the work. The inseparability of these elements is also pointed out by Vygotsky in the case of scenic *perezkhivanie*, as the form through which an actor plays his role is intrinsically connected to the content of the scenic image, to his relationship with this image, to the socio-historical meaning of the image, and the objective intended by the scenic *perezkhivanie*.

Vygotsky presents the example of theater director Yevgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922), who was Stanislavski's student, to explain how the same image, when subordinated to different stylistic objectives (satire, praise) will produce very different scenic *perezkhivania*. Thus, an actor who plays Hamlet's lack of action in an ironic tone, for example, will call upon a series of emotions and seek to compose and transmit an entirely different *perezkhivanie* than an actor that follows the tragic *pathos* of the Shakespearean text. Hence, the scenic *perezkhivanie* is explicated and grounded according to the stylistic tasks to which they are subordinated and, because of that, differs from everyday *perezkhivanie*.

Another element Vygotsky (1999b) brings to his analysis is the consideration that different acting systems and stylistic tasks (as well as the scenic *perezkhivanie* that might derive from them) have a social nature. Therefore, the *perezkhivanie* of the actor varies depending on social class and historical context and, thus, should be analyzed in its concrete manifestation through a historical perspective. The center of this argument, to Vygotsky (1999b), is Denis Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor*, at the basis of which is, precisely, the topic of *perezkhivanie*.

## **Vygotsky and Diderot: the dialectical overcoming of the paradox through concrete psychology**

Vygotsky production about art, from his critical texts to scientific ones, does not aim to propose an aesthetic agenda, i.e., the author does not defend this or that type of art – for instance, classic art at the expense of modern one and vice versa. Nevertheless, he evaluates the quality of artistic works, especially in his critical texts and in *The Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 2001), when he establishes a hierarchy of literary genres according to their level of complexity.<sup>15</sup> The same attitude can be identified in the text about the psychology of the actor (Vygotsky, 1999b).

An initial elaboration of the problem of the psychology of the actor is identified by Vygotsky (1999b) in Diderot's thought, mainly as it is synthesized in the *Paradox of the Actor* (Diderot, 1985). Starting from the fundamental difference between the emotions of actor and that of the role, Diderot considers the actor's work as essentially technical and mimetic. The transmission of emotions is nothing more than a learned ability, which requires a refined technique and does not have (nor should have) any relationship with the artist's intimacy. On the contrary, the actor's subjectivity is seen a hindrance to an accurate performance, which is engendered by meticulously calculated gestures, words, and tones.

Diderot (1985) defends – as Vygotsky (1999b) will do – the use of the resources of the actor (voice, tone, gesture, action) as the raw material to fulfill a stylistic task, for example, in the following excerpt:

it is not the expression "I love you", which was torn away from the modesty of an austere woman, the projects of a frivolous woman, the virtue of a sensitive woman: it is the tremble of the voice through which it is pronounced; the tear, the gazes that follow (p. 154).

Thus, as Vygotsky, Diderot distinguishes the textual content from how it is interpreted, which changes depending on the proposed stylistic task.

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<sup>15</sup> Aiming for the necessary generalizations, Vygotski (2001) organizes the study "from the simplest to the most complex," that is, "the fable, the novella, and the tragedy as three literary forms that gradually complexify and superimpose one another" (p. 103).

Vygotsky (year) mentions the law of the unity of declamation defended by Diderot (2004): “This unity imposes clothes, a tone, a gesture, a contention, from the chair in the temples to the stages built in the crossroads” (p. 157). The Russian author strongly defends this principle in many of his critical works. To mark this position, Vygotsky (2015) resorts to the image of a chess game to describe the intentional and non-random nature that should permeate any theatrical staging:

One single idea of the director, whatever it may be, penetrates the whole play from beginning to end: everything is planned, calculated, measured, considered, and consciously executed to the extent of the artistic forces in the realization of the scenic idea of the play (p. 205).

Another point Diderot (1985) defended and is also present in Vygotsky is the supra-individual and artificial character of the emotion transmitted on stage. Emotion is seen as subjugated to intellect: “We [the audience] feel; they [actors] observe, study, and paint ... it is not their heart, but their head that does all” (p. 164). Though the Vygotskian perspective about emotions is different from the French Enlightenment philosophy, as the latter underestimates them as disruptive and disorganizing elements,<sup>16</sup> his position regarding the artificial and impersonal character of aesthetic emotions appears as an essential point of convergence.

A powerful example is Vygotsky’s review (2015) of the performance of the ballerina Ekaterina Geltser, written 1922, in which he enthusiastically defends ballet as an artificial language of movement: “All the technique of classical dance – jumps, body spins, position of the feet, and so on– is an *artificial* movement system” (p. 265). The idea that art produces intelligent emotions, though far from devaluing emotions in favor of intellect, implies the notion that aesthetic emotion differs and, more precisely, elevates itself from a common one, and this is due to the unique and combined action of different psychological functions (perception, memory, emotion, and fantasy). The distinction between life on and off stage is another common point between the authors. Diderot's idea that a good actor does not die on stage as he dies on his bed is echoed by Vygotsky (2015) in one of his reviews:

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<sup>16</sup> As we observed, "Sensibility is never without weakness of organization" (Diderot, 1985, p. 164).

the speech is uncommon, not mundane. It is openly scenic, declamatory, elevated, and solemn. As a French actor said, on stage, one does not speak, but enunciate. Intonation and sounds are materials for the actor's creation, as the paint is for the painter. He is free to use them depending on his goal. One does not speak in life as one does on stage. (p. 377)

We will now see how this issue is understood by Stanislavski.

## Stanislavski and Diderot: analytical-descriptive resolution of the paradox

Though none of the texts published in life quotes Diderot's essay, there is, in Stanislavski's library, a fully annotated edition of *The Paradox of the Actor*. Besides this, Whyman (2008, pp. 45-46) mentions the exchange of correspondences and notes of conversations that Stanislavski had in 1914 with Liubov Gurevich, a theater critic and historian, who would be his editor for almost 30 years. In these documents, it is possible to observe the study – advised by Gurevich – of the problem posed by Diderot and the several attempts to solve it.

The first movement of Stanislavski regarding Diderot's position, which contradicts the theater that, according to him, should have *perezhivanie* as a central category, is to seek support in the available scientific literature. The topic of the paradox of the actor reemerges in 1896, brought by Alfred Binet, one of Stanislavski's sources in psychology. In his book, *On Double Consciousness*, from 1896, Binet develops the problem of "double consciousness in hysterical individuals.". One of his experiments, however, deals with the "double consciousness" of actors. Binet describes some experiments with nine French actors and actresses that would have led him to conclude that Diderot was wrong, and that the emotion experienced on stage was real. Without considering that the experiment was held with entirely different ends, the study of Binet's articles was enough for Stanislavski to claim the role of *perezhivanie* as a central element of theater (Whyman, 2008, p. 47). Nevertheless, this brought many problems. How can one deal with the art of actors and actresses like Benoit-Constant Coquelin<sup>17</sup> and Sarah

<sup>17</sup> Benoit-Constant Coquelin (1841-1909) was one of the greatest actors of the *Comédie Française* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Stanislavski considered him an exponent of the art of representation.

Berhardt,<sup>18</sup> for example, who not only claimed Diderot's positions but could also exemplify them in practice in their own scenic play? This is how we see, in *The Actor: Work on Oneself* (Stanislávski, 1954), the distinction of three different tendencies in theater.

The first, according to Stanislavski (1945), is the tendency of the craft (*remeslo*). According to him, this approach should not be considered art because it does not work with *perezhivanie* in any of its aspects. The main element of this type of theater is the cliché – to Stanislavski, a form that is mechanically appropriate and deprived of *perezhivanie*, a false copy of mannerisms and interpretations of previous actors who played the same role.

The second tendency is the theater of *perezhivanie*, in which not only emotions are experienced during the performance but one in which this type of experience is the very aim of the theater.

On the third and last tendency, Stanislavski (1954) presents what he calls *theater of representation*, which should also be considered a form of art. The actor's work described in this theater is precisely the one Diderot preferred in his essay. To Stanislavski, the predominant attitude is the technical capacity to learn, dissect, and coldly recombine emotions, aiming to reproduce their external form during the presentation.

Therefore, Stanislavski (1954) proposes an analytical-descriptive procedure to solve the actor's paradox. As seen, unlike Vygotsky, who approaches the paradox from the point of view of the historicity of the problem, Stanislavski creates an abstract theater typology in which he could categorize the types of theater that, according to him, should be recognized as art but that do not have *perezhivanie* as an end.

## Final Remarks

This article had the initial aim to map the construction of the notion of aesthetic *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky, considering the broad array that goes from his initial works, still pre-psychological, to one of his last texts, the chapter “On the problem of the psychology of the actor’s creative work” (Vigotski, 1999b). The analysis of this *corpus* reveals that the idea of *perezhivanie* is more than a simple repetition or reformulation of ideas from other authors, even

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<sup>18</sup> Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was a famous French actress in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also considered by Stanislavski, as one of the greatest names of the so-called "art of representation" (*iskusstvo predstanleniya*).

if a certain inconsistency, including regarding terminology, can be found, as we could see, for instance, that the notions of aesthetic *perezhivanie* and aesthetic reaction are initially used as synonyms. The study of the early works resulted in the consolidation of the following elements as different traits of the concept of aesthetic *perezhivanie* for Vygotsky: it differs from the daily experience and implies overcoming it; it has an emotional nature and involves the transformation of feelings; it has a social and active character; and it plays a role in human development. Still in the first part of the article, we observed that an analogous movement occurs regarding the reception of Stanislavski's ideas in its initial and late phases.

From the study of Vygotsky's early work, we moved to the analysis of the 1934 text about the psychology of the actor's creative work. To do so, we put in perspective and in dialogue the ideas of Konstantin Stanislavski and Denis Diderot about the so-called "paradox of the actor," seeking points of convergence and divergence. A first point that needs to be highlighted in this dialogue is that, when discussing Diderot's and Stanislavski's proposals for the actor's work, Vygotsky does not adhere to any of these approaches but *critically discusses both*. In a markedly dialectical position, Vygotsky partially *rejects* and *accepts* Diderot's and Stanislavski's ideas in a clear movement of negation and dialectical sublation.

Regarding the markedly emotional character of *perezhivanie*, there is a convergence point between the Vygotskian and the Stanislavskian views. As seen, for the theater theoretician, *perezhivanie* appears as the specific way emotions are experienced. To Vygotsky, aesthetic *perezhivanie* engenders specific emotions originating from the contact with a work of art.

We can see that both actors establish a dialogue with psychology authors to formulate the concept within their own theoretical bodies. Stanislavski used scientific works to corroborate his practice. In the introduction of his book about the work of the actor, Stanislavski (1954) stresses that his terminology should not be understood as scientific and that, while articulating the different elements of his System, his aim was to give practical-theatrical meaning to terms that were already commonly used in the theater jargon of his time (p. 5). In turn, Vygotsky is interested in creating his own psychology. At first, this psychology is classified as objective and, later, i.e., in the text about the psychology of the actor's work, it

is transferred of the field of concrete psychology.<sup>19</sup> Hence, despite displacements and adjustments, Vygotsky's intention was always connected to a scientific project, except for the critical texts from his early phase.

As said, among the sources for the concept of *perezhivanie* to Stanislavski are Tolstoy's ideas on infectiousness. This is another fundamental point of divergence between the theatrologist and the psychologist. Though Vygotsky refers to infectiousness in his first work – an essay about *Hamlet* written in 1915 – he will firmly reject this notion in his works after 1920, in which he concluded that the aesthetic *perezhivanie* is more than the reproduction of the artist's feeling in the audience's psyche: in this process the feeling goes through a qualitative alteration, which the author metaphorically compares to the biblical miracle of turning water into wine. Besides this, among the main interlocutors of Vygotskyan ideas about art, are the authors of Russian Formalism (see Marques, 2020), while Stanislavski dedicated a great part of his writings to argue against formalism and, mainly, against the concepts of defamiliarization and grotesque (Toporkov, 2016, pp. 75-79).

In this sense, we highlight that, for Vygotsky, the emotion produced through aesthetic *perezhivanie* can be considered *intelligent*, which calls upon an entire system of functions: perception, imagination, and fantasy. This process is *eminently conscious*. In this sense, Vygotskyan psychology moves away from the psychoanalytical interpretations of artistic creation and perception. On the other hand, according to Stanislavski (1958), art is human communication carried out directly through emotions, without the mediation of reason (p. 470).

Finally, a crucial aspect of the actor's psychology outlined by Vygotsky is his proximity with the realm of ideology. To the author, "the experience [*perezhivanie*] of the actor, his emotions, appear not as functions of his personal mental life, but as a phenomenon that has an objective, social sense and significance that serves as a transitional stage from psychology to ideology (Vigotski, 1999b, p. 244). Thus, actor's experience does not have absolute value and content but is established as a category that develops itself socially and historically. This way, the paradox of actor is a historicizable phenomenon: "instead of the once-and-for-all, given paradox of the actor of all times and peoples, we have before us from the historical

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<sup>19</sup> Vygotsky's elaboration on concrete psychology in the text about the psychology of the actor's work was also outlined in "Concrete Human Psychology" (Vigotski, 2005).

aspect, a series of historical paradoxes of actors of given environments in given epochs (Vygotski, 1999b, p. 244). This theoretical movement is different from Stanislavski's, to whom there is a certain conception of *perezhivanie* – living experience – which is typical of a specific type of theater with artistic value, i.e., the theater of *perezhivanie*. If, on one hand, Vygotsky brought to light the *social* aspect of the scenic *perezhivanie* and placed it withing a materialistic and historical understanding, Stanislavski operationalized this concept in the individual level to build its own practice and theatrical pedagogy, which, in its turn – seen through Vygotsky lenses –, respond to artistic and stylistic tasks that are specific and historically determined.

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### ***Corresponding author:***

***Marques, Priscila Nascimento*** - Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, Faculdade de Letras, Departamento de Letras Orientais e Eslavas (D-227, D-229 e D-231), Avenida Horácio Macedo, 2151 - Cidade Universitária da Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro, RJ, 21941-917, Brasil.